

PERSPECTIVE

‘Realism in one country?’, by Frédéric Vandenberghe

Frédéric Vandenberghe is professor of sociology at the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro (IUPERJ). Hailing originally from Flanders in Belgium, he has worked at many universities in Europe (University of Manchester, University of Humanist Studies in Utrecht, Brunel University in London, European University Institute in Florence) and the United States (UCLA and Yale University). Having lived in suitcases for almost twenty years, he has now finally settled in Brazil. He defended his PhD at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris in 1995 on theories of reification in German sociology, from Hegel to Habermas. Published in two volumes in French in the series of the MAUSS (a reference to Marcel Mauss that is also an acronym of the anti-disciplinary Movement Anti-Utilitaire dans les Sciences Sociales/Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences),¹ this reconstruction of critical theory is now available in abbreviated version in the Critical Realism Series under the title *A Philosophical History of German Sociology* (Routledge: London, 2008). Working at the intersection of philosophy and sociology, his main interests are related to German social philosophy, Anglo-Saxon social theory and French sociological theory. He has published a book on the sociology of Georg Simmel (*La sociologie de Georg Simmel*, [Paris: La Découverte, 2001]) and, more recently, also a book on posthumanism and biocapitalism (*Complexités du posthumanisme. Trois essais dialectiques sur la sociologie de Bruno Latour* [Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006]). He is currently writing a book (in French) on the new trends in world sociology and gathering materials for a book (in Portuguese) on the sociology of the soul.

‘Realism in one country?’ was originally written in Portuguese for a Brazilian audience (see Note 3, below). We are delighted to have the opportunity to make this lively and insightful account of critical realism available to English-speaking readers. Its publication here coincides with the first conference of the International Association for Critical Realism to be held in Latin America, at the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro, July 23rd-25th 2009 (<http://www.uff.br/iacr/>). One of the few attempts to produce a synoptic account of the entire Bhaskarian system, it brings a thorough grounding in social theory, in particular its European currents, to the task. We believe that this impressive overview will be particularly useful for scholars who are relatively new to critical realism, but established scholars for their part will appreciate the sociological insight and novel perspectives it brings to bear on this school of thought, for example as ‘the fifth and final phase of the protracted *Erklären-Verstehen* controversy’, issuing in a ringing endorsement of ‘first-wave’ critical realism, understood – refreshingly – as implicitly dialectical and developing. It is accordingly surprising to discover that its treatment of the ‘second wave’, the dialectical turn as such, is somewhat perfunctory and dismissive; as Vandenberghe himself is the first to

¹ *Une histoire critique de la sociologie allemande*, 2 vols (Paris: La Découverte/ Mauss, 1997-1998).

admit, his essay is not the place to turn for in-depth critical engagement with this important phase of Bhaskar's thought. Its ultimately individualistic reading of the political message of the philosophy of meta-Reality is also, I believe, deeply contentious. However, both in this and in its account of the dialectical turn, it is representative – in its own unique way – of a widely held view within the critical realist community that deserves to be aired and discussed. In that its account of the spiritual is more positive and detailed than that of the dialectical turn, it also interestingly instantiates a concern expressed by Alan Norrie that dialectical critical realism, squeezed between original critical realism and the the philosophy of meta-Reality, will become the forgotten turn of critical realism.² All in all, the essay makes an outstanding contribution to the critical contextualisation and exegesis of Bhaskar's philosophy.

Mervyn Hartwig

² Alan Norrie, *Dialectic and Difference: Exploring Dialectical Critical Realism* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2009).

REALISM IN ONE COUNTRY?³

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There is no alternative to ontology.

(Roy Bhaskar)

In the field of the social sciences, the conjunction of Boolean stats and rational choice has become the default option of the *homo academicus* with multiple research projects and a steady career plan. Deprived of their traditional ‘subjects’ and burdened with a bad conscience, anthropologists have followed Clifford Geertz and James Clifford on their route to cultural studies and taken all the turns, twists and returns of the humanities.⁵ To survive, they have put their bets on undefined interdisciplines, such as cultural studies, science studies, gender studies, chicano studies and postcolonial studies, to name but a few. They now do their fieldwork at home in the city or, following their subjects wherever they go, in the global villages of the network society. Sociology for its part has splintered into a myriad highly specialised subfields. Confronted with ‘multiple paradigmatisis’, it seems to have given up the idea of a general sociological theory altogether.⁶ In the same way as anthropologists lost their traditional ‘subjects’ with the advance of modernisation, sociologists are afraid of

³ This text is an English-language version of the introduction to F. Vandenberghe, *Teoria Social Realista. Um dialogo franco-britanico* (UFMG: Belo Horizonte, forthcoming 2009). In this book, which constitutes as it were my pledge to Brazil, I have gathered various articles of mine, originally written in French or English, in which I read French social theorists (Bourdieu, Freitag, Boltanski, Latour) against the foil of critical realism (Harré, Bhaskar, Archer) and try to develop a realist theory of ‘collective subjectivities’. I thank Mervyn Hartwig, Gabriel Peters and Cynthia Hamlin for their commendations and comments.

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⁵ Following Richard Rorty’s advertisement of the ‘linguistic turn’ as ‘the most recent philosophical revolution’ (R. Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967], p. 3), which, incidentally, coincided with his own move from analytic to pragmatic philosophy, we have seen a cascade of programmatic declarations of ‘turns’ and spectacular ‘returns’ within the human sciences, both within the phenomenological-hermeneutic branches and the structuralist-semiotic ones (D. Bachmann-Medick, ed., *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* [Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006]). The interpretative, communicative, dialogical and ethical turns converged towards a return of religion; the spatial, performative, affective, somatic, visual and iconic turns led to a fine-grained analysis of performances and other representations; like Heidegger’s *Holzwege*, the postmodern, cultural, reflexive, deconstructive and rhetorical turns led nowhere. Sign of the times: after the turns came the wars – the culture wars, the gender wars, the value wars, and now also the science wars.

⁶ For a good overview of the current state of the art of social theory, see A. Caillé et al. ‘Une théorie sociologique générale est-elle pensable?’, *Revue du MAUSS* 24 (2004): 7-352/ ‘Symposium: Does the Prospect of a General Sociological Theory Still Mean Anything’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 10(2) (2007): 179-286 as well as the occasional updates in the subsequent issues of the *Revue du MAUSS*.

loosing their modern ‘object’ with the advent of globalisation. Methodological individualism and the fear of methodological nationalism arrive at the same conclusion (as Mrs. Thatcher): ‘Society does not exist’ (but what about capitalism?). Like the Europeans, sociologists have become a rather nostalgic bunch, looking backwards to the moment of synthesis that is known as the ‘new theoretical movement’ of the eighties⁷ – with Bourdieu as the new Durkheim, Giddens as the new Weber, Habermas as the new Marx and Luhmann as the new Parsons; or moving fast-forward to the latest fads and foibles.⁸

1. *Metropolitan Sociology*

In the global theory business, the French, the Germans, the Brits and the Americans are still calling the shots.⁹ The Germans work on the foundations, the Anglo-Saxons build the house, the French are called in for the interior decoration and the Americans take care of the budget. Until recently, and to a certain extent even till today, the main national traditions were rather provincial. Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu did an excellent job of ‘deprovincialising’ British and French sociology. Thanks to a thorough knowledge of the French, the Anglo-American and the German traditions, Giddens succeeded in breaking through the narrow empiricist confines that mark sociology in the United States (United States?) up till today. Although I seriously doubt that structuration theory will prominently feature in future textbooks, Giddens’s historical contribution consists in my opinion in having legitimated social theory as a relatively autonomous subfield within sociology. Instead of outsourcing the conceptual work to philosophers, sociologists can now pursue philosophical questions *within* sociology without having to go back all the way to the pre-Socratics.

Coming from the provinces, Bourdieu (who never cites Giddens, apart from a few well placed snide comments on the Third Way) opened up the field of French social sciences through an active dialogue with the European and Anglo-American traditions of philosophy, anthropology and sociology. He thereby significantly raised the level of French sociology – and since the massive international reception of his work at the end of the nineties, also of sociology worldwide. Indeed, it is perhaps not exaggerated to say that Bourdieu’s critical sociology now occupies a homologous position to the one Parsons’s structural functionalism occupied in the 1950s. Heresy has become *doxa*, the prophet a priest.

Both Giddens and Bourdieu have actively engaged with German social theory, not just with the classics but also and especially with the work of Jürgen Habermas, the most sociological of the leading philosophers. Habermas occasionally cites the work of both Giddens (whose concept of agency as transformative power comes directly from Roy

⁷ J. C. Alexander, ‘The New Theoretical Movement’, in N. Smelser, ed., *Handbook of Sociology* (London: Sage, 1988).

⁸ For the newest trends in radical academic chic, see *Theory, Culture and Society*; for an overview of the trendy vocabulary (Agamben, Agencement, Badiou, Dispositif, Transtextual, Posthuman, Remnant, Rubbish, Etcetera), see M. Featherstone, C. Venn, R. Bishop and J. Phillips, eds, ‘Problematizing global knowledge’, special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* 23(2-3) (2006): 1-616.

⁹ For a good, dialogical reconstruction of the main national traditions within Euro-American sociology, see D. Levine, *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995). Metropolitan sociology has become quite cosmopolitan – but, as usual, in a rather one-directional way: metropolitan theory is quickly exported to the semiperipheries of the world, but southern theory is hardly ever re-imported to the centre (with the occasional exception of Bhabha, Spivak, Quijano or Canclini to confirm the rule, but then they use French post-structuralism to criticise colonialism within the academy).

Bhaskar), and Bourdieu, the critical rationalist who is often seen as a critical realist.¹⁰ But like his French colleague, he never refers to Bhaskar, the founder of critical realism. In spite of the fact that critical realists have extensively written about the towering figure of the second generation of the Frankfurt School,¹¹ Habermas does not even seem to know that critical realism exists. Giddens for his part was directly involved in a debate with Bhaskar,¹² whereas Margaret Archer, the main representative of critical realism in sociology, who studied with Bourdieu at the *École des Hautes Etudes in Sciences Sociales* in Paris in the late 1970s, developed a solid realist critique of structuration theory,¹³ but neither the work of Bhaskar nor the morphogenetic theory of Archer seem to be well known outside the UK.¹⁴

2. What's Critical about Critical Realism?

Critical realism is a British-based international movement in philosophy and the human sciences that is inspired by the (early) work of Roy Bhaskar, especially *A Realist Theory of Science*, a book that stands as a landmark in the philosophy of science alongside the work of Popper, Lakatos, Kuhn, Bachelard or Canguilhem.¹⁵

¹⁰ For a realist critique of Bourdieu's rationalism, see F. Vandenberghe, "'The Real is Relational': An Epistemological Analysis of Bourdieu's Generative Structuralism", *Sociological Theory* 17(1) (1999): 32-67.

¹¹ R. Keat, *The Politics of Social Theory: Habermas, Freud and the Critique of Positivism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981); N. Stockman, *Antipositivist Theories of the Sciences: Critical Rationalism, Critical Theory and Scientific Realism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983); W. Outhwaite, *Jürgen Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

¹² Cf. the articles by Giddens and Bhaskar in the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 13(1) (1983) (special issue on structuration/transformation): A. Giddens, 'Comments on the Theory of Structuration', pp. 78-80; and R. Bhaskar, 'Beef, Structure and Place: Notes from a Critical Realist Perspective', pp. 81-96.

¹³ M. S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge: (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ I know that the realist movement is an international one with strongholds in Northamerica (USA + Canada), Scandinavia, Australasia, etc. The rhetorical question of the title of my article is not meant as a geographical reference, but as a historical one. With Stalin (and against Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev), I would like to defend the unpopular thesis that the ultimate victory of realism over positivism and conventionalism depends above all on the internal relations within realism (the construction of complete realism in one country) and that it is only when the whole system is worked out that realism can defeat the enemy on an international scale.

¹⁵ Bhaskar's first two books have been especially influential. While *A Realist Theory of Science* (Brighton: Harvester, 1975) develops a realist position for the natural sciences, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979) extends it to the social sciences. Like all of Bhaskar's writings, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (London: Verso, 1986) and *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1989) are dense, yet readable. Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994) provides an accessible and not uncritical introduction to Bhaskar. M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson, and A. Norrie, eds, *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998) is an excellent reader that contains essential texts by Bhaskar, Harré, Archer, Sayer, Outhwaite and Porpora. Although Bhaskar is a professional (but until recently mainly freelance) philosopher, his work is read mainly by social theorists. Written by sociologists, the early books by Russell Keat and John Urry (*Social Theory as Science* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975]), Ted Benton (*Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies* [London: Routledge, 1977]), William Outhwaite (*New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory* [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987]) and Andrew Sayer (*Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* [London: Routledge, (1984) 1992]) are excellent. The International

As a radical critique of positivist and postmodernist philosophies of science, critical realism offers an alternative philosophy for both the natural and the social sciences that foregrounds ontological questions. Inverting Kant's idealism, while maintaining its method of presuppositional analysis, it puts transcendental philosophy 'back on its feet'. Critical realism revindicates ontology as a theory of being, distinct from epistemology, and defends the strong thesis that the theory of being cannot be reduced to the theory of knowledge. Although essences and existences can only be known 'to us' under certain descriptions, they nevertheless exist independently from these descriptions. Showing by transcendental arguments that ontology cannot be reduced to epistemology, it develops a non-anthropocentric ontology for the natural sciences and a humanist praxeology for the social sciences.

The term 'critical realism' (which Lukács also used to refer to his Marxist aesthetics) arose by elision of the phrase 'transcendental realism' (which refers to Bhaskar's philosophy of the natural sciences) and 'critical naturalism' (which refers to his philosophy of the social sciences), but is now generally accepted to refer to work in philosophy (Harré, Bhaskar, Collier), sociology (Archer, Outhwaite, Sayer), psychology (Harré, Secord, Keat), economics (Lawson, Brown, Fleetwood), geography (Sayer, Massey, Thrift), ecology (Soper, Benton, Dickens), theology (McGrath, Shipway, Porpora), law (Norrie), feminism (New, Hull, Hamlin), linguistics (Pateman, Jones) and even comparative literature (Potter, Tew) that is associated with the work of Romano Harré, Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer.

As a militant anti-positivist, I got first interested in critical realism because it offered the hammer I was looking for to crush the numbers. Through an analysis of scientific experiments, it shows that positivism is not even adequate for the natural sciences. If that is the case and Popper got it all wrong, as I think he has, then one would have to come up with very strong arguments indeed to make the positivist position in the social sciences minimally plausible.¹⁶ The rejection of the positivist model of explanation does not mean, however, that in the social sciences there is only space for interpretation. Standard critiques of positivism are parasitical on positivism; they simply invert it and assault it where it is weakest, but they do not confront and defeat it on its own terrain. Even when positivism itself is openly contested, as in the famous *Positivismusstreit* of the 1960s,¹⁷ which opposed critical theorists (Adorno, Habermas) to critical rationalists (Popper, Albert), the disputants typically accepted an essentially Humean account of natural law and of natural scientific theories. By introducing a new conception of causality and breaking with the empiricist misconception of the experimental sciences, scientific realism defeats empiricist realism on its own terrain and offers a coherent transcendental-dialectical approach of reality that points beyond the dilemmas of the 'Erklären-Verstehen controversy'.

Association for Critical Realism has its own series of books at Routledge and its own *Journal of Critical Realism* (incorporating the defunct *Alethia*), but realists also regularly publish in the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* and *Radical Philosophy*.

¹⁶ I consider Popper to be the most over-valued philosopher of the twentieth century. His neo-positivism did a lot of damage in the natural sciences. As he had to admit that the 'covering law-model' does not really apply to the social sciences, he developed an alternative model of explanation for the human sciences and introduced the situational logics of rational choice as second best in the human sciences. Although I am quite oecumenic in my approach and try to integrate as many philosophemes and theorems as I can, I categorically oppose positivism and rational choice for philosophical, scientific and normative reasons. For a realist critique of rational choice, see M. Archer and J. Titter, *Rational Choice Theory: Resisting Colonisation* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁷ T. W. Adorno, et al. *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1969).

Like Habermas's and Karl-Otto Apel's approach,¹⁸ critical realism is transcendental: it thinks through the conditions of possibility or necessity of scientific knowledge to make ontological claims about the world. It is also dialectical: it continues the Hegelian tradition by analytic means and seeks to reconstruct Marxism. But Bhaskar is more radical in his critique of positivism, because unlike his German colleagues, he questions not only the limits of positivism and the reification of the social world it induces when it overreaches its limits, but also the very validity of positivism in the natural sciences.

Critical realism enters the 'science wars' fighting on two fronts. This is not a 'war of position', it is a 'war of movement' that is being waged at the same time against the empiricist-positivist misconception of the sciences and against conventionalist, constructivist and relativist conceptions that are rooted in idealism and drift towards superidealism. Against the naturalism that seeks a unified conception of the sciences in positivism, hermeneutics, structuralism and deconstruction have insisted that nature is socially and linguistically constructed.¹⁹ This is the case because facts are always and inevitably 'overdetermined' by theory, while theories are always 'underdetermined' by facts.

The 'underdetermination thesis' states that for every fact there are always a variety of theoretical explanations that are compossible with it and, if one fiddles enough with the *ceteribus paribus* clausula, it is always possible to 'save the phenomena' (Duhem-Quine). The social enters into this picture to narrow down the multiplicity of possible theories and to create order by reducing the complexity to more manageable proportions. As in Leibnitz, the social assumes the role of God and reduces the number of compossible worlds to one – the best of all possible worlds. Which theories are ultimately selected depends, among other things, on the *Weltanschauung* that is compatible with the theory and the distribution of the relations of power within the scientific field.

If the underdetermination thesis fills the gap between theory and facts by introducing the social, the 'overdetermination thesis' eliminates the gap altogether and socialises the whole apparatus of science, from the basic categories to the technologies of observation. To show that facts are theory-laden, let us imagine Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brache sitting next to each other on the hill watching the dawn.²⁰ Did they see the same thing? No, they did not. Kepler regards the sun as fixed and sees the world dropping away beyond the rim, whereas Tycho, who follows Ptolemaius, and considers the earth as fixed, sees the sun rising at the horizon. Facts don't speak for themselves. As they are always categorised and schematised by one or another theory, philosophy or cosmology that is socio-historically determined, there is no observation that is not an interpretation and no interpretation that does not involve an imaginary representation of reality.

¹⁸ J. Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968); K-O. Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981).

¹⁹ Let's quote a representative statement: 'It has thus become increasingly apparent that physical "reality", no less than social "reality", is at bottom a social and linguistic construct; that scientific "knowledge", far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it; that the truth claims of science are inherently theory-laden and self-referential; and consequently that the discourse of scientific community, for all its undeniable value, cannot assert a privileged epistemological status with respect to counter-hegemonic narratives, emanating from dissident and marginalised communities' (A. Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' *Social Text* 46-47 [1996], 217). This statement on 'transformative hermeneutics' is certainly representative of mainstream postmodernism, but as it was written by an insincere self-proclaimed realist and only meant to expose the field of science, technology and society studies (aka STS) as institutionalised fraud, it triggered the 'science wars'.

²⁰ N. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

What one observes is paradigmatically inducted and paradigms change over time. So, when Thomas Kuhn writes that after a scientific revolution, ‘the scientist afterwards works in another world’,²¹ he is only stating the obvious, but without caution. What has changed is the life-world, his or her world, the ‘world’ if you want, but not the world in itself. It was there before the scientist arrived on the scene and will, presumably, still be there when the last human being expires (in a couple of millennia from now if we are lucky, a couple of centuries or decades if we are not).

Whoever suggests that the world changes with every paradigm change is drifting into superidealism and flirting with irrationalism. Without the assumption that different theories offer alternative accounts of the *same* world, no science is possible. At the limit, we arrive at the patently absurd proposition that there are as many worlds as there are theories and as many worlds as there are theorists and – as everybody is a theorist – as many worlds as there are individuals (but if one is talking about life-worlds, the latter proposition makes a lot of sense. We could even invert it and say that every individual is a world, a monad).

Critical realism wholeheartedly accepts epistemological relativism, but to avoid the irrationalism of the multiplication of worlds, it introduces a categorical distinction between the *intransitive* or ontological dimension of reality and its *transitive* or epistemic dimension. The intransitive dimension refers to entities in the world that are real and exist independently of what we think (externalism), while the transitive dimension refers to things that are real, but whose existence is dependent on what we think (internalism).²² Thanks to this crucially important distinction between the theory-independence of the world (intransitive dimension) and the socio-historical variability of scientific knowledge (transitive dimension), critical realism is able to avoid the ‘epistemic fallacy’, which reduces ontology to epistemology and defines being in terms of knowledge. Thanks to this double focus, critical realism manages to combine and reconcile ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationality.²³ It is thus uniquely compatible with a sociology of science and technology, while avoiding the excesses of radical (de)constructivism.

Critical realism does not only destroy and deconstruct; as a propaedeutic to the sciences, it also constructs and reconstructs. It acts, as Bhaskar says, quoting Locke, as ‘the under-labourer, and occasionally as the midwife, of science’.²⁴ It clears the rubble, removes the idols (Bacon), ideologies (Marx) and other epistemological obstacles (Bachelard) that block a better understanding of scientific practices. In addition, it cuts

²¹ Kuhn, T. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 1970), 121.

²² Interestingly, in his reflections on the object of the history of science, Georges Canguilhem makes a similar distinction between the natural or intransitive object and the scientific or transitive object: ‘The history of the sciences is the history of an object that is, that has a history, whereas science is science of an object that is not and has no history. ... This natural object, outside of every discourse with regard to it, is, of course, not the scientific object’ (*Etudes d’histoire et de philosophie des sciences* [Paris: Vrin, 1989], 16). While historical epistemology has distinguished the two dimensions of knowledge, it lacks, however, the transcendental philosophy that integrates the sciences and the history of sciences into a unified framework.

²³ In his scathing, book-length critique of Rorty (*Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1991]), which I strongly recommend to any genuine pragmatist, Bhaskar argues that the American ironist has combined the errors of positivism and postmodernism in a single philosophy. As he remains wedded to a positivist account of natural sciences, he has only added a Nietzschean army of metaphors to a Humean-Hempelian ontological base. By reducing the world to a language-game (in fact, a game of language), he has replicated the Kantian resolution of the third antinomy: we are rigorously determined as material bodies, but as edifying philosophers, we are free subjects who can redescribe the world at will.

²⁴ Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 10.

the umbilical cord with the reigning philosophy of science and develops a comprehensive alternative that is animated by an interest in emancipation and Enlightenment (in the Occidental and Oriental senses of the term). As a philosophy *for* science (and against ideologies that threaten it), critical realism offers solid ontological foundations, not just for the natural sciences, but also for the social sciences. With Bachelard, we could say that critical realism ‘gives the sciences the philosophy it deserves’.

In the natural sciences, critical realism leads to a total eclipse of positivism. In the social sciences, it leads to a consequent reformulation of Marxism that is able to overcome the old debate of the sixties about the epistemological *coupure* that, allegedly, separates the young Dr. Marx from the mature analyst of *Das Kapital*.²⁵ Instead of opposing (Hegelian) humanist and structuralist (Spinozist) readings of Marx, Bhaskar develops a strong relational conception of social structure that derives from a realist reading of Althusser, but that does neither sacrifice structure to agency nor science to emancipation. Like all good Marxists who know their Aristotle and their Hegel, Bhaskar conceives of Marxism as a practical philosophy of emancipation and proposes a transformational model of social action that overcomes the opposition between agency and structure in dialectical fashion. As a self-confessed socialist, our social theorist also wonders ‘how we switch the social process from a primarily reproductive to a primarily transformative mode’.²⁶

Although Bhaskar’s praxeology has some notable affinities with Giddens’s structuration theory, it avoids some of its problems, which are mainly related to the theorem of the ‘duality of structure’ and its omission of the phenomenon of emergence. Through a sustained emphasis on emergence²⁷ and an implicit re-introduction of the dualism of agency and structure – or, better (to avoid Giddens’s confusing language, which collapses structure into culture), between life-world and system, critical realism offers a stratified ontology that is able to take into account the alienating autonomy of social systems without denying the power agents have to change the world and themselves. As this stratified ontology does neither reduce social systems to social structures nor social structures to agency, it avoids the double reduction that characterises the fallacy of ‘central conflation’.²⁸ Although I think that critical realism needs a stronger phenomenological grounding and also a stronger integration with hermeneutics than Harré, Bhaskar and Archer, who are steeped in the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of action and ordinary language, have offered so far, I am quite confident that it offers the best foundations for a solid critical theory of society that tries to integrate the critique of reification and the promise of emancipation into a single framework.²⁹

3. *Three Waves of Realism*

Roy Bhaskar is a man of many trades with many lives. Born during WWII in England of an Indian father and an English mother, who were both Theosophists, he went to Oxford to study philosophy, political science and economics. Having finished his Ph.D.

²⁵ L. Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1965).

²⁶ Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, 8.

²⁷ R. Bhaskar, ‘Emergence, Explanation and Emancipation’, in P. Secord, ed., *Explaining Human Behaviour* (London : Sage, 1982), 275-310.

²⁸ Archer, *Culture and Agency*, 72-100 and *Realist Social Theory*, 87-134.

²⁹ Vandenberghe, *Une histoire*, Conclusion; F. Vandenberghe, ‘Langage, Self and Society: Hermeneutic Reflections on the Internal Conversations That We Are’, in M. Archer, ed., *Conversations on Reflexivity* [provisional title] (Routledge, forthcoming 2009).

under the supervision of Harré, he started to develop the philosophical system of transcendental realism at the end of the sixties when, concerned with the problem of underdevelopment in the Third World, he came to the conclusion that economics is autistic and without relevance for the real world and for real people.³⁰ Like his illustrious predecessors who opened up whole new vistas and were driven by a mission statement and a strong conviction that they would be able not only to solve the problems of philosophy, but also of humanity, Bhaskar is a man of grandiose ambitions and innumerable projects. More than once he has announced books (or series of books) with high-pitched titles that were never published – at least not as yet: *Philosophical Underlabouring*; *Critical History of Western Philosophy*; *Philosophy and the Eclipse of Reason*; *Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx*; *Philosophical Ideologies*; *Dialectical Social Theory*; *The Philosophy of Money*; *Transcendence and Totality*; *Between East and West*; *Re-enchanting Reality*; *Living meta-Reality*; *Work In: A Manual*.

His trajectory reminds me somehow of those of Auguste Comte and Charles Sanders Peirce. Like Comte, he started out with a strong belief in science and ended up in the mystical waters beyond religion. Like Peirce, he is a bit of a genius (he is said to have written his first book when he was 20), but as he advanced in his reflections and deepened his ideas, his writings and his language become more and more idiosyncratic, obscure and esoteric. He abuses neologisms, TLA's (three letter acronyms) and semi-formalised arguments with n-dimensional graphic representations, which may well constitute, as in the case of Peirce, his 'natural language of self-communication'.³¹ Aware of the problem, he has added glossaries to his books, but as they are packed with internal references, they are not very helpful to make full sense of Bhaskarese.³²

Like feminism, critical realism comes in three waves. In a first wave (1975-1993), Bhaskar investigated the foundations of the philosophy of the sciences. He sequentially developed the system of transcendental realism for the natural sciences, the system of critical naturalism for the social sciences and an explanatory critique of positivism as an ideology. When this critique of positivism morphed into a metacritique of all previous philosophies, from the ancient Greeks via Hume, Kant and Hegel to twentieth-century neo-Marxism, critical realism took a dialectical turn. Investigating the causality of voids and the work of absencing, critical realism of the second wave (1993-2000) developed dialectical critical realism as a more encompassing system that subsumes critical realism into a new totalising philosophy that aspires to overcome all the dualisms and contradictions. Since 2000, critical realism has entered its third phase. Passing from the transcendental to the transcendent, Bhaskar has developed a monist, spiritual and esoteric new age philosophy – the philosophy of meta-Reality – and disappeared somewhere in India.

³⁰ For converging attempts to overcome the blinders of neo-classical economics and politics, see the webpage of the post-autistic economics movement (www.paecon.net).

³¹ V. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity* (New York: SUNY, 1989), xiv.

³² The following sentence, taken from *Plato Etc.* (with its arrogant subtitle) (R. Bhaskar, *Plato Etc.: The Problems of Philosophy and their Resolution*, London: Verso, 1994), is typical of Bhaskar's increasingly bad style at the end of the millennium (1993-2000): 'The dialectic of freedom goes as follows. We start from absence in the context of primary polyadisation manifesting itself as desire. This entails referential detachment and we are soon into classification and causality and thence onto the plane of ontological stratification and alethic truth. Absence has already been presupposed (and in the dialectical circle agency entails it), and in the context of the contradictions within and between differentiated and stratified entities, emergence and thence totalities result ... Dialectic is the logic of absence. But in satisfying my desire in absencing agency I am thereby committed to the project of universal human emancipation' (p. 169). To unpack this 'turbo-charged paragraph', I refer the reader to M. Hartwig, 'Emancipatory axiology' in Hartwig, ed., *Dictionary of Critical Realism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 157-64.

3.1 *The first wave: critical realism*

The first and strongest wave can be subdivided in turn in three moments: Transcendental realism (1), critical naturalism (2) and explanatory critique (3).

3.1.1. Transcendental realism

In a first, foundational moment, which coincides with the simultaneous publication of *A Realist Theory of Science* by Bhaskar and *Causal Powers* by Harré and E. H. Madden in 1975,³³ Bhaskar extends Harré's pathbreaking critique of the Humean concept of law with a conceptual investigation of the conditions of possibility of scientific practices. As a philosopher he treats the self-same world as the natural sciences, but transcendently, that is, from the perspective of what such scientific practices necessarily presuppose about the world prior to any empirical investigation, and asks the crucial question: 'What must the world be like for science to be possible?'³⁴ The answer to this question deserves to be called ontology.³⁵

As an investigation into the ontology of natural kinds, transcendental realism submits the world of the positivists to a critical scrutiny and, thinking through the presuppositions of scientific experiments, it concludes that the familiar hypothetico-deductive model of Mill, Popper and Hempel is ill-conceived. By focusing on the empirical invariance between observable events (if x, then y), positivists have reduced the world to a world of atomic facts – a flat predictable world of events without structure that looks like a cosmic table on which billiard balls (preferably white and red) collide with each other without necessity, without internal connection, without being embedded within a gravitational field. Following von Wright's analysis of the causal intervention of the scientist in scientific experiments,³⁶ Bhaskar demonstrates that scientific practices only make sense if one assumes that the world is an open system in which a multiplicity of factors operates at the same time.³⁷ To artificially close the system, experiments are set up. Allowing for meticulous control of all the factors and antecedent conditions (which are otherwise smuggled into the *ceteris paribus* clause, which, uncontrolled, creates havoc), experiments make causal explanation and prediction possible. Restricting significantly the validity of the D-N model, Bhaskar affirms that 'it is only under conditions of closure that given the antecedent, the

³³ R. Harré and E. H. Madden, *Causal Powers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975).

³⁴ Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 23.

³⁵ There is a distinction between philosophical ontology and specific scientific ontologies ('ontics'). The transcendental argument only says that given that science occurs, the world must be structured in a certain way. The philosopher only affirms *that* certain entities exist in the world and that they do so independently of science, even if they can only be known through science; she does not say *what* these entities are, but wisely leaves the domain of ontics to the scientist. Quarks, superstrings, charms are not her business.

³⁶ G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).

³⁷ Karl Otto Apel, *Die Erklären-Verstehen Kontroverse in transzendental-pragmatischer Sicht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979) also used von Wright's interventionist theory of causality as a launching pad for a sustained immanent critique of the determinism of the nomologico-deductive model. Updating Apel's remarkable philosophical reconstruction, critical realism can be considered as the fifth and final phase of the protracted *Erklären-Verstehen* controversy. Coming after neo-Kantianism, neo-positivism, neo-Wittgensteinian philosophy and critical theory, critical realism is the grand finale that finishes the positivist struggle and finishes off positivism.

deduction of the consequent event is possible, so that the conditions for the Popper-Hempel theory of explanation are satisfied'.³⁸

Unlike positivists, who, following Hume, think of laws as constant conjunctions or empirical invariances between contingently related observable events (two billiard balls that collide) and assume that laws can be observed in nature, critical realists know that constant conjunctions of events are rare in nature and that they are made to happen through artificial closure of the system. By making abstraction of the causal intervention of the scientist in experiments, positivists unknowingly identify the laws of nature that they observe in experimental circumstances with the laws in nature. Consequently, they generalise their findings beyond the experimental setting and do not realise that by identifying causal laws with constant conjunctions of events that are artificially produced they are led to the absurd conclusion that scientists cause and even change the laws of nature!

There is an 'ontological difference' between scientific laws and sequences of events. While the latter are man-made and belong to the transitive dimension of reality, the former belong to the intransitive dimension and exist independently of human beings. If experimental activity is to be rendered intelligible, one must radically 'ex-hume' the sciences and conceive of laws as statements about 'causal powers' (Harré) or 'tendencies' (Bhaskar) of underlying or overarching generative mechanisms (like a gravitational field) which the scientist does not produce, but which operate in nature and whose presumed existence explains the conjunctions of events the scientist actually observes and registers in the laboratory as a *necessary* one.

Although these generative mechanisms themselves may be invisible or may only become visible through the use of sense-extending technology (Bachelard's 'phenomenotechnics'), their existence is nevertheless presupposed in scientific practice to explain the observable conjunction between events. Affirming the existence of generative mechanisms that internally bind causes and effects together does not lead back to metaphysics (nor to psychedelics – the *virtus dormitiva* of opium, according to Molière's famous doctor).

As a matter of fact, a good deal of theory construction in the natural sciences consists in building models of generative mechanisms and in setting up tests to find out what their structure is and how they function.³⁹ Events are not to be thought of as producing other events without an intermediary mechanism that establishes an ontological tie that binds cause and effects together, not contingently, but necessarily so. By virtue of the internal structure of the thing, the thing has the disposition it has to act in a certain way, and hence it must produce the effect it does produce, in favorable conditions and in the absence of constraints. As Mao said: 'The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external, but internal'.⁴⁰ The contingent conjunction of acid and litmus paper does not explain why the blue acid paper turns red. It is because litmus paper is sensitive to acid that, under suitable conditions, it turns red when it is conjoined to acid solution. By virtue of its intrinsic nature, because of its inner structure, litmus paper changes colour when it is dipped in proper acid. In science one observes an empirical regularity, invents a plausible explanation for it and then checks the reality of the entities and processes postulated in the explanation.

Unlike positivists, who unduly privilege empirical experiences, critical realism is a modal ontology that gives priority to potentiality over actuality and to actuality over

³⁸ Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 103.

³⁹ R. Harré, *The Principles of Scientific Thinking* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

⁴⁰ Mao Tse Tung, *Citations du Président Mao Tse-Toung* (Peking: Editions en langues étrangères, 1966), 235.

experience. Foregrounding the causal powers of entities and processes, it stresses that tendencies of generative mechanisms may be real, yet unexercised, exercised, yet unactualised, and actualised independently of human perception or detection. A causal power can be exercised over and over again or not be exercised at all. Although exercised, its power may be neutralised by other countervailing powers (chlorine gas turns blue litmus paper white), so that actually nothing results and factually nothing happens. And when something happens, it may well happen without anyone noticing it, as in Berkeley's famous riddle about the tree that falls in the forest. In any case, the experimental situation in which the real (the potential), the actual (the factual) and the empirical (the observable) coincide is an exceptional one and should not be taken as the rule.

Science never ends. When a hypothetical generative mechanism that explains the relation between phenomena as a necessary one is identified, confirmed and described, the hypothesis turns into a fact that needs not only further exploration, but also further explanation. Indeed, the *explicans* of today becomes the *explicandum* of tomorrow. Scientists look further and delve deeper to find a more basic, underlying generative mechanism that explains the emergence of phenomena. Because of the phenomenon of emergence, reality is stratified and science has not only a horizontal, but also a vertical carriage. 'Science is (vertically) in motion in a world (horizontally) in motion'.⁴¹ Like a miner, science always delves deeper and deeper, moving from one stratum of reality to the next (vertical dimension), discovering on each stratum a multiplicity of generative mechanisms that explain the relation between events (horizontal dimension). And at the very bottom, science discovers the ground of all beings and unveils the mystery of being itself: *Aletheia*.⁴² Not everything that is or can be can be the object of the sciences.

3.1.2. Critical naturalism

In *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979), his second major book that coincides with the second moment of the first wave, Bhaskar moves from the natural to the human sciences. Exploring the limits of transcendental realism, he develops critical naturalism as an anti-positivist, hermeneutically informed, praxeological philosophy of the social world that is compatible with humanist Marxism. As an ongoing product of human practices, social systems are, by definition, open systems. For ontological reasons, and not just for moral ones, controlled experiments are hardly possible in the social sciences.⁴³

In the social sciences, explanation is possible, but prediction is not. It is enough to make a prediction public to have it potentially refuted. This is the case, because the 'double hermeneutic' undercuts the distinction between the transitive and the intransitive dimension of the sciences.⁴⁴ The theories and the discourses that are part of the

⁴¹ Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism*, 40.

⁴² For an erudite exploration of the metaphor of the mystical veil that covers nature, from Heraclites to Heidegger, see P. Hadot, *Le voile d'Isis. Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

⁴³ R. Harré and P. Secord, *The Explanation of Social Behaviour* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972). Social experiments tend to create confusion, not order. That is true for political revolutions (Lenin), creative happenings (Debord) and breaching experiments (Garfinkel).

⁴⁴ The notion of 'double hermeneutics' was coined by Giddens (*Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* [London: Macmillan, 1982], 1-17) to thematise the two-way circulation of concepts between the ordinary language of lay-actors and the specialised dialects of professional scientists. As a matter of fact, I think it is a quadruple hermeneutics: the common sense interpretations of the analyst are not only parasitic on the common sense interpretations of the actors (double hermeneutics); but as the latter are embedded in

transitive dimension of science are implicated in, and constitutive of, the intransitive dimension of the social world. Unlike billiard balls, which are not conscious of themselves, humans are self-conscious and self-interpreting animals which are always already caught up in symbolic representations of reality that reveal and constitute reality as a meaningful totality that makes sense.⁴⁵ Against the background of this pre-interpreted, meaningful symbolic universe, actors consciously, reflexively and intentionally lead their lives with others, act alone or together in situations of all kinds, and by doing so reproduce and change their material, cultural, social and personal surroundings. Human nature is such that every social action inevitably and simultaneously has repercussions, however small, on material transactions with nature, on the absent totality of language, on the social relations with other actors and on the personality of the actors themselves.

The hermeneutic dimension of human reality seriously limits the possibility of naturalism in the human sciences. Even if we transpose the realist model of explanation from the natural to the social sciences, the fact remains that the social sciences are human sciences and that explanation of social action always necessarily and inevitably presupposes previous interpretation of the action not only by the analyst, but also and above all by the actors themselves. For us humanists, a billiard table is relevant only in so far as it is surrounded by players who are members of society and are involved in various language games that are embedded in different forms of life. Players who act, talk and drink together around a pool table do so in conditions that they have freely chosen – but the game they play, the language they speak and the table they lean on are pre-given to and presupposed by every player.

Through an investigation of the ontological limits to naturalism in the social sciences, Bhaskar analyses the conditions of possibility of sociology. Once again, the question that drives him is a transcendental one: ‘What properties do societies possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?’⁴⁶ As societies are man-made, one cannot abstract from the people, their actions and passions, their concepts and beliefs, their lives and their histories. If one studies people as one studies colliding particles in a cyclotron, one reifies and dehumanises societies. A Humean society in which natural experiments were possible and one could predict human actions rigorously would no longer be a human society. However qualified, positivistic naturalism is proscribed in the social sciences – at least as long as humans are humans and science has not turned them into zombies or brains in vat. What Hannah Arendt wrote about behaviorism also

symbolic interpretations that are part of culture – one interprets what is already interpreted and understands what is already understood – and the former are formulated with reference to the corpus status of the discipline, our interpretations are of the fourth order (*pace* Schütz, not of the second order).

⁴⁵ It is enough to study a different epoch or to move to a different culture, not to mention a different civilisation (such as India), to realise the extent to which our lifeworld is a pre-interpreted one that always already makes sense. The experience of *dépaysement* is a radical one, comparable perhaps to religious conversion. The alienation from one’s own culture that comes with the move to an alien nation opens up the possibility of a depth hermeneutics (*Tiefenhermeneutik*) that uncovers and reveals the ‘pre-judgments’ and ‘pre-concepts’ of one’s own culture. A cosmopolitan critical theory would supplement the critique of political economy with a critical hermeneutics that seeks inspiration in cultural anthropology. Instead of focusing on exploitation and alienation (Marx’s *Entfremdung*) it would reflect and systematically think through the experience of estrangement (Brecht’s *Verfremdung*).

⁴⁶ Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, 25. Transcendental arguments are quite common in sociology (G. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* [London: Athlone, 1981]). Classic sociology is overwhelmingly neo-Kantian. It is not only Simmel who famously asked in the first excursion of his *Soziologie* how society is possible. Taking the actuality or existence of the object of knowledge as given, Weber and Durkheim also explicitly attempted to discover the conditions of its possibility. In spite of its Hegelian pedigree, a good deal of Marxism has also been understood as critique of sociology in the Kantian style.

holds for other forms of regularity determinism: ‘Statistical uniformity is by no means a harmless scientific ideal; it is the no longer secret political ideal of a society, which, entirely submerged in the routine of everyday life, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence’.⁴⁷

Drawing on the work of Peter Winch, our social philosopher insists heavily on the action-dependency, the concept-dependency and the transience of societies. ‘Social structures, unlike natural structures (1) do not exist independently of the activities they govern, (2) do not exist independently of the agents’ conceptions of what they are doing in their activity, and (3) may be only relatively enduring (so that the tendencies they ground may not be universal in the sense of space-time invariant)’.⁴⁸ Besides these ontological limits on naturalism, there is also an epistemological limit. Because social structures are necessarily unperceivable and are only present in their effects, empirical confirmation will always be indirect, via the detection of the effects of social structures. Indeed, social structures and social formations are not tangible, but does that mean that they do not exist, that sociology is irrelevant and that it can be reduced to social psychology? As an absent totality of relations between meanings that are only present in its instantiations, language is a virtual system, but should we therefore write off structural linguistics as a form of metaphysics and limit the analysis to pragmatics and performances? As a system of relations between capital and labor, capitalism is transfactual (due to ideological distortions it may even be contrafactual), but should we therefore conclude that it does not exist and analyse it in terms of neo-classical economics? If the answer to all these questions is positive, then we can dispense altogether not only with realism but also with sociology. If the answer is negative, as I am convinced it is, then we can proceed with the investigation and propose a regional ontology for sociology that incorporates and interrelates material relations (Marxism), culture structures (hermeneutics) and social practices (Wittgenstein).⁴⁹

Once again, our master theorist is involved in a double war, but this time it is not a ‘war of movement’, but a ‘war of position’ against individualism and holism. Against individualists, prototypically represented by Weberians, he defends a relational conception of society that is indebted to Althusserian Marxism. As it is a product of human action, society represents as it were the quasi-intransitive dimension of a relatively autonomous social science. It does not consist of individuals in situations of action or interaction, but is made up of abstract, but nevertheless real and persistent, human relations between social positions that form a system. The system of social relations can be analysed in realist terms as a series of loosely related generative mechanisms endowed with emergent properties and causal powers.

⁴⁷ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), 40.

⁴⁸ Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 38. Following the friendly debate with Ted Benton (see his ‘Realism in Social Science: Some Comments on Roy Bhaskar’s *The Possibility of Naturalism*’, in Archer, et al., eds, *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, 297-312) about ‘pseudo-naturalism’ in the human sciences, Bhaskar conceded some ground and now accepts that social structures can exist and persist without and even despite human agency (see R. Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* [London: Verso], 154-60).

⁴⁹ The ontology of the social world that Bhaskar proposes is a philosophical, not a scientific one. But as a Marxist, he privileges material relations over ideal relations and practices and ends up defending substantive positions within sociology. One may want to give more or less weight to the other elements that make up the social world (if one privileges culture and practices over material structures, critical realism collapses into structuration theory; if one privileges practices over culture, structuration theory collapses into ethnomethodology). Similarly, one may want to substitute hermeneutics with semiotics or Wittgenstein with phenomenology. But any social theory with general ambitions will necessarily have to make reference to all of the elements.

Class relations are the paramount example of such social relations that pre-exist to individuals, predefine their situation of action and condition their social practices, but they are not the only ones. Racial and patriarchal relations of exclusion and inclusion can also be viewed as systems of internal relationships among social positions.⁵⁰ Relationally understood, society is the totality of systems of human relations between social positions, each of which has its own causal powers, properties, tendencies and capabilities. Capitalism is real in its effects, which can be reinforced, as is the case in Brazil, by the atavism of ‘generalised master–slave-type relations’ that are racially coloured (the combination of class and race can be lethal). Although social systems and their powers exist at the macro-level, they structure the micro-situations of interaction, as any maid interacting with her patron will be able to tell you. Loosely interconnected systems of internal relations do not operate over the head of human actors, but they causally affect them by conditioning their actions in terms of capabilities and constraints, interests and ideas, projects and impossibilities.

Against holism, personified by your stereotypical Durkheim, Bhaskar reintroduces social practices into the picture and proposes a transformational model of social activity that is indebted to Aristotle and Marx. This dialectical model of praxis, which forms the core of Bhaskar’s social ontology, is roughly similar to Giddens’s model, but unlike structuration theory it is more strongly committed to the project of critical theory and has therefore a more materialist and emancipatory slant.⁵¹ Social systems emerge from practices and presuppose them (action as ‘efficient cause’), while practices presuppose in turn symbolic systems that structure agency (structure as ‘material cause’), but neither of the systems can be reduced to the practices without remainder.

Although societies are the product of former practices and only exist and persist in virtue of intentional human agency, these practices presuppose the existence of society as unacknowledged condition and have unintended consequences (sometimes of a systematic nature: alienation, reification) at the systemic level. Society is thus both the transcendently necessary, but unacknowledged precondition and unintended, but emergent, consequence of intentional human agency (the ‘duality of structure’, to use Giddens’s jargon) and, similarly, human agency is both the conscious production and unconscious reproduction of society (‘duality of agency’). People do not speak to transform the language nor do they shop to reproduce the capitalist economy, but this is nevertheless the unintended and inexorable consequence of their activity. Insisting on the poietic dimension of transformative action, Bhaskar stresses that structuration is always a mix of re-structuration and re-production. The transformational character of praxis thereby ensures that agents are always also transforming the structures that they are in the process of reproducing and, as there is no creation ex nihilo, that they are always reproducing the very structures they are transforming.

3.1.3. Explanatory critique

⁵⁰ A relation ‘Rab’ is internal if a is a necessary condition for the existence or essence of b. The relations between master and slaves, capitalists and workers or husband and wife are examples of internal relations. For a more sophisticated analysis of the dialectical logic of internal relations, see B. Ollman, *Dialectical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁵¹ For an insightful comparison of Giddens’s idealist and Bhaskar’s materialist conception of structure, see D. Porpora, ‘Four Concepts of Social Structure’, in Archer, et al., eds, *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*.

Critical realism has offered a transcendental refutation of positivism in the natural and human sciences. Having convincingly argued that all sciences have an intransitive and a transitive dimension ('duality of truth'), Bhaskar introduces, in a third moment, the metacritical dimension as an element of any philosophy of science that respects itself.⁵² Every philosophy of science presupposes, explicitly or tacitly, a philosophical ontology (the intransitive dimension), a philosophical sociology (in the transitive dimension) and a historical sociology of knowledge (in the metacritical dimension). As a kind of reflexive return on the philosophical, sociological and ideological presuppositions of positivist, idealist and realist accounts of science, metacritique typically aims to identify the presence of significant absences in thought and opens up the way to an explanatory critique of false arguments. Pressing against the limits of the positivist account of the sciences, Bhaskar develops a sustained immanent critique of the 'positivist illusion' and shows that positivism misrecognises the nature of the world, society, science and itself. The problem with positivism is that it can neither sustain the idea of an independent reality (intransitive dimension) nor that of a socially produced science (transitive dimension). As we have seen, positivism presupposes an empiricist ontology. Following Hume, it reduces laws to regular sequences of events and events to observable experiences. Unable to sustain the independent existence of nature, it collapses nature (*an sich*) into 'nature' (*für uns*) and thereby commits the epistemic fallacy. Making abstraction of the experiments in which constant conjunctions between events can be observed, it reifies scientific facts into things. Positivism not only humanises nature. With its sociology of atomic individuals, it also naturalises society. By reducing humans to passive agents who register the facts of nature and hardly communicate among themselves, it desocialises and dehistoricises science. As a result of this eclipse of the historicity of theory, positivism is unable to properly deal with scientific and social change. Together the reification of scientific facts and the naturalisation of human action transform positivism into an ideology that reproduces and reflects, rationalises and mystifies normal science and common sense, as well as the relation between both. As a form of false consciousness, it misrepresents natural science – presenting itself as a reflection of nature, it omits the work that is necessary for its production. Having shown that the natural sciences have a hermeneutic dimension and an ideological function, Bhaskar moves on to the social sciences and argues that they are moral sciences. Against Weber and his axiological neutrality, he claims that the human sciences are intrinsically critical (of ideologies and common sense beliefs, as well as of the objects of these beliefs and ideologies) and that they are so because neutral descriptions are not neutral. As the social world is constituted not just by beliefs, but also by values, one cannot strip the world of value-predicates in the name of science. Consider Isaiah Berlins famous example of the holocaust. 'The statement that 'millions of people were massacred' is not only more evaluative, but more precise and accurate than the increasingly anemic and unsatisfactory statement that 'millions of people were killed', 'millions of people died' and 'the country was depopulated'.⁵³ Against Hume, he boldly rebuts the naturalist fallacy and claims, rather unconvincingly in my opinion, that if one can show that a belief is false and if one can explain this belief as a case of ideology, then one can and must pass to a negative evaluation of the system that causes the false belief and *ceteris paribus* to a positive evaluation of remedial action that seeks to remove or change the system in question.

⁵² Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism*, 25.

⁵³ R. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford Blackwell, 1991), 154.

3.2 *The second wave: dialectical critical realism*

Subsequently to 1993, our transcendental philosopher radicalised his attempt to overcome all the dichotomies of philosophy and the human sciences (subject/object, Verstehen/Erklären, value/fact, theory/practice, etc.) and developed a full-blown dialectical theory of the ontological, epistemological and ethical domains of reality. Retrospectively, we can see that the metacritical turn of critical realism not only announced a return to Marx and Hegel, but that Bhaskar's attempt to 'out-Hegel' Hegel ushered in the second wave of critical realism. The massive, dense and difficult *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* presents dialectical critical realism (DCR) as a philosophical system that is driven forwards from alienation to freedom by the ontology of absence – absence as lack (noun), but also (verb) as the absenting of absences and absentive agency.⁵⁴ As a sustained immanent critique that introduces the thin edge of the wedge into thick arguments, dialectical thinking identifies tensions, anomalies and contradictions within analytic thinking and overcomes them in an encompassing dialectical philosophical system. As in Hegel, the identification of holes proceeds, through absenting, towards the whole and the truth.

The philosophical system of DCR is composed of four interinanimated movements: The first moment (1M) corresponds roughly to transcendental realism, but reformulates it by introducing non-identity and alterity; a second edge (2E) deepens the concept of non-identity by revealing an absence that causes it and proposes the process of absenting as a dialectical transition from non-identity to totality; at the third level (3L) of totality, the absence is absented and the contradictions are overcome in a holistic system of internally related or intra-active elements that causally co-determine each other and so causally co-determine the whole; finally, the fourth dimension (4D) of the unity of theory and practice in practice is reached thanks to the intervention of radically transformed transformative practice – Bhaskar says 'transformed (autoplasmic), transformative (alloplasmic), trustworthy (fiduciary), totalising, transformist (oriented to deep structure global and dialectically universal change) transitional praxis'⁵⁵ – ultimately flourishing in freedom.

If the dialectical movement 1M-4D sounds like philosophical algebra, well, my friend, I am afraid it is.⁵⁶ Although the dialectic of absenting is not without occasional breakthroughs and contains useful clarifications of former arguments, it is written somewhere at the limit between insight and insanity. In *Plato, Etc.*, another untractable book, Bhaskar summarises DCR in seven substantive theses: '1. Humanity is not the centre of the cosmos. 2. There are non-actual realities. 3. Non-beings exist. 4. Entities permeate one another. 5. Intentional causality occurs. 6. Values can be derived from

⁵⁴ Unlike Mervyn Hartwig (*Dictionary of Critical Realism*, xvi), I am not convinced that *Dialectic* is 'destined to assume a place in the ranks of the truly great works of philosophy', but let it pass. The book is definitely not user friendly, but that does not mean, as is sometimes claimed, that it is 'unreadable'.

⁵⁵ Bhaskar, *Dialectic*, 156, 266, 401.

⁵⁶ In his later, more inspired writings, he will add the spiral of enlightenment 5A-7A to the 1M-4D dialectic. The fifth aspect (5A): the spiritual dimension that all emancipatory projects, whether secular or religious, presuppose; the sixth realm (6R) of re-enchantment; the seventh zone (7Z) or seventh awakening (7A) of non-duality. In summary (and in anticipation of the theosis or maximal realisation of the divine on earth), here is Bhaskar's version of *Being and Nothingness*: 'In virtue of its commitment to an investigation of being, and being as structured, differentiated and changing; understanding being as processual; understanding being as a totality or a whole; understanding being as incorporating transformative praxis and reflexivity and its latest stage understanding being as incorporating a spiritual dimension or aspect, critical realism digs deep enough to show how the realm of demi-reality rests on the possibility of a dual but non-alienated mode of being in relative reality' (R. Bhaskar, *The Philosophy of meta-Reality. Vol. 1: meta-Reality: Creativity, Love and Freedom* [New Delhi: Sage, 2002], 314).

facts. 7. The good society is implicit in elemental desire.⁵⁷ I mention the seven cryptic theses here without further comment, because the connection it suggests between the cosmos and eudaemonia serves as a good transition to the esoteric third wave of critical realism.

3.3. *The third wave: transcendental dialectical critical realism and the philosophy of meta-Reality*

At the dawn of the millennium, Bhaskar published *From East to West* in the Critical Realism: Interventions Series with a beautiful hand-painted fragrant rose on the cover.⁵⁸ The book came as a shock to many and was widely received with disbelief. Whereas the old Marxists and the new Hegelians had expected a treatise on dialectical social theory, Bhaskar gave a spiritual twist and presented transcendental dialectical critical realism (T)DCR as an enchanting philosophy of and for universal self-realisation. Although his flirting with alethic truth was not devoid of mystical overtones, no one had expected that he would introduce God as the *ens realissimum*. As the ultimate ground of reality, God is as it were the causal power of causal powers. He is at once real and actualised, experienced and experienceable, in different ways, by man, most notably in moments of transcendence. ‘Ontological realism about God in the intransitive dimension is consistent with epistemic or experiential relativism in the transitive dimension’.⁵⁹ Reconnecting to the homeland of his father, our Indian philosopher discusses in earnest the idea of reincarnation and sprinkles his text with words, such as *karma*, *moksha*, *shakra* and *kundalini*, which your yoga teacher will explain to you after a session of ‘active meditation’. As if this was not enough, to render these orientalisms plausible, he also added a narrative novella to the book in which he autobiographically recounted the life of his last fifteen incarnations!

Rejected by the university system, Ram Roy Bhaskar had the courage to expand his mind, open his heart and listen with his third ear. Without restraint – freely using an inspired language that is understandable for those who are prepared to listen – he openly muses about love, peace, creativity, spirituality and unity. As always, he seeks to overcome dualisms – between East and West, female and male, yin and yang, mind and body, the sacred and the profane, heaven and earth. Going beyond realism – ‘realism about transcendence leads into the transcendence of realism itself’⁶⁰ – he has developed his own esoteric philosophy of meta-Reality as a philosophy of being that underpins, overcomes and sublates dialectical critical realism. The ‘meta’ refers to the philosophy that comes after critical realism (metarealism), to the wisdom that comes after

⁵⁷ Bhaskar, *Plato Etc.*, 161.

⁵⁸ R. Bhaskar, *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁵⁹ R. Bhaskar, *From Science to Emancipation: Alienation and Enlightenment* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), 146. This thesis is defended and elaborated at length in M. Archer, A. Collier, and D. Porpora, *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* (London: Routledge, 2004). In this book, Margaret Archer (a Catholic mystic), Andrew Collier (a Protestant) and Doug Porpora (a believer in intelligent design) come out of the religious closet and apply the main tenets of critical realism to theology. It may be surmised that, as Ram Roy Bhaskar is more interested in oriental religions and, therefore, in immanence he does not figure in the book. For those readers who doubt where I stand, let me just say that I am a practicing humanist and a free thinker with a sense of ‘weak mysticism’. If I freely paraphrase Bhaskar without irony, it is only to reveal the taboo on religion and to practice, as it were, a hermeneutics of the occult.

⁶⁰ R. Bhaskar, *Reflections on meta-Reality: Transcendence, Emancipation and Everyday Life* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), 229.

philosophy (spirituality) and, ultimately, to an etheric level beyond or behind reality (God).

Pushing the thin edge of the wedge, the philosophy of meta-Reality offers an Achilles Heel critique of the philosophical discourse of the West, from Iona to Iena. The main defect of the whole philosophical tradition is that it possesses no yoga and, therefore, no tried and tested method for accessing the subtle domain of non-duality. The main theses of Bhaskar's alternative philosophy of mind are that this level of reality is real, that ultimately all is one, and that this unity is not beyond experience. The world we know, which is the object of the sciences, is a dual world, a realm of duality that is underpinned and exists only in virtue of a realm of non-duality. The dual world is a 'demi-reality' – it is a tissue of errors and illusions, but the illusion and errors are real and causally efficacious (see Marx on fetishism, Adorno on ideological blinding and Baudrillard on hyperreality). The world of duality can be investigated empirically by the sciences and transcendently by critical realism. Underneath, beyond, above and within the demi-real, an ultimate realm exists. More real than reality, this realm is meta-Reality. It can be experienced in moments of transcendence. When one lifts the veil of *maya* and awakens from the nightmare of demi-reality, one feels at one with oneself, one's actions, others and all beings in the universe. Unlike critical realism, which offers the best account of the dual world – in fact, it offers the best account of what to get rid of! – the philosophy of meta-Reality meditates and speculates on an expanded ontology beyond science as currently practised: 'Within this vastly expanded conception of being, and the very extended ontology it necessitates, we now see being as re-enchanted, that is valuable, meaningful and containing invisible, (more generally unknown and even unmanifest), subtle, mysterious and even magical qualities and connections, which our contemporary sciences know nothing of'.⁶¹

In contrast to critical realism, the philosophy of meta-Reality is 'not so much concerned with thinking being, but being being'.⁶² The 'being being' our meditating philosopher is talking about is, in fact, a becoming of being, the becoming of our being when we connect to a deeper reality and realise our real selves. This self has no sense of self and certainly no ego.⁶³ Perfectly deconditioned, it finds itself in its basic 'ground-state' of being where, through transcendental identification of the self with all beings, it becomes hyperconscious and immediately connects with all that exists in the universe. In tune with oriental mysticism, Bhaskar affirms that the divine is ingredient in all beings and that everything is infinitely connected at the ultimate level of the universe which he calls the 'cosmic envelope' (which corresponds to what David Bohm (1980), who is also influenced by Krishnamurti, calls the 'en-folded'⁶⁴). But if the self can identify with beings who are not explicitly conscious – such as a stone, a flower or the stars –, then we have to impute implicit consciousness to all beings. 'In the same way everything in the universe is implicitly enfolded within my consciousness and implicitly enfolded within me; that is, every object in the universe is enfolded in my consciousness, that is co-present within me'.⁶⁵ When I become conscious of the whole universe enfolded within me (= God), I am in my ground-state of being and without

⁶¹ Ibid., 257-8.

⁶² Bhaskar, *The Philosophy of meta-Reality*, 224.

⁶³ Where the Ego was, an ineffable self should become. As is written in *The Upanishads*: 'The Self beyond all words is the syllable Om ... The self is Om, the indivisible syllable. The syllable is unutterable, and beyond mind. In it the manifold universe disappears. It is the supreme good – One without a second. Whoever knows Om, the self, becomes the self.' *The Upanishads*, selected and trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), 51.

⁶⁴ D. Bohm, *Wholeness and The Implicate Order* (London : Routledge, 1980).

⁶⁵ Bhaskar, *Reflections*, 215.

effort I connect to the ‘cosmic envelope’ (which is increasingly becoming conscious of itself). I see the world in a different way, I feel the other in a more intense way and having changed the way I am, I also act in a different way – with love, care and compassion.

With his turn to spirituality, Bhaskar has developed a new age philosophy ‘within the bounds of secularism, consistent with all faiths and no faith’.⁶⁶ This turn inwards does not mean that he turns away from society. To the contrary, by connecting one Enlightenment to the other, he claims to have radicalised the project of emancipation of the *Aufklärung* with a humanist project of universal self-transformation. His mysticism is practical and innerworldly. We have to withdraw from the world in order to change it. The enlightened are in the world, but not of the world, to vary another Weberian formula. The realisation of the good society is only possible if we liberate ourselves from structures of oppression and alienation. The ultimate cause of all suffering is the alienation of our true selves. When we disconnect from the world to connect to the deeper level of *Dasein*, we become free and stop feeding the system that alienates us. We start to change the heteronomous system when we cut off the supply lines on which it depends. Bhaskar argues that, as a matter of fact, we are already essentially free. The structures of oppression and exploitation only persist because people are not conscious of what binds them; the system depends partially on free, spontaneous, creative, generous, loving activity. The Marxists will no doubt be baffled by his affirmation that war is sustained by love (solidarity of the soldiers at the front) and exploitation by creativity. ‘It is love which sustains all the negative emotions and all the forms of oppression and violence. Similarly it is creativity which keeps exploitation going. ... The further you dig, the more you will find that it subsists upon a level of joy, bliss, love and creativity’.⁶⁷

In typical Indian fashion, our integral philosopher affirms that individual self-realisation is the only route to universal self-realisation. ‘The minimum necessary unit for emancipation is the whole human race’.⁶⁸ Connecting the new age to the new left, our guru repeats the mantra of the sixties: the personal is political. Individual realisation presupposes a moral commitment to universal self-realisation and moral commitment implies a political engagement to realise the eudemonistic society. Wasn’t it Marx who said that the free development of each was the condition of the free development of all? Leftists may not like his conclusion, but the only thing we can change right now is ourselves. Let’s therefore start with an internal revolution and, who knows, perhaps one day, when my ‘internal conversations’ resonate with yours and we all enter into planetary communication, we will form a social movement that will change the world.

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⁶⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁸ Bhaskar, *The Philosophy of meta-Reality*, xxviii.

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